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ABSTRACT

Teaching college freshman composition students how to write a research paper can be used as a way of emphasizing reading and comprehension skills as well as helping them learn to test the conclusions of other research. Research work should require more than an introduction to the Dewey Decimal System and the tools of the research room, it should require such skills as reading for thesis and development, separating facts from opinions, and testing both. Taking good notes requires the ability to paraphrase, to summarize, to quote, and to decide when to do each. Some assignments that help develop such skills include reading and analyzing good essays based on research, corroborating evidence found in such essays, reading responses to essays such as letters to editors, identifying the differences between factual and editorial writing, learning to make attribution either internally or in footnotes, and preparing an independent project that indicates a mastery of the other skills. (TJ)

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TEACHING RESEARCH AS A READING SKILL

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TEACHING RESEARCH AS A READING SKILL

There must be hundreds of English departments like mine in the country--located in small to medium colleges and universities where the greatest burden of the freshman English program is borne not by teaching assistants but by members of the regular faculty. I'm sure that most of those departments are like mine in another way: we are constantly fighting about our freshman program--our textbooks, the degree of unification desirable, what we are trying to do. As often as once a year at my school the question is asked: why don't we abolish the research paper from the second semester course?

The usual reasons given for keeping it--students will have to write other research papers in college and we owe it to the other departments to impart this basic skill, many graduates will need this skill for graduate school or careers--seem unsatisfactory and hardly strong enough to win the day over the usual objections--why can't the other departments who want it teach it themselves? why can't students who need it learn it on their own? and, especially, why set ourselves up as such an easy target for plagiarism?

I am a strong advocate of the research course, but not for any of the previous reasons. I agree that many graduates of my school at least will never be required to write formal research papers in their careers. I agree that the way the research paper is too often taught--as though the only extra information students who have passed 101 need to write a research paper is a map of the library and a lengthy lecture on footnote form--makes teachers sitting ducks for papers that have been purchased, borrowed, or stolen. But a course that places as much emphasis on the reading and comprehension skills involved in research as on the composition skills--and that reduces manuscript skills

to the actual rather inconsequential position of importance--can be an extremely valuable part of a student's college education.

Students will be reading the results of other persons' research for the rest of their lives. Some of that writing will be carefully researched, supported, and documented; an unfortunately large proportion of it will use the language of research but not its discipline. All of us could supply examples of popular topics for psuedo-research writing: the Burmuda triangle, for instance, or the latest cure for arthritis or cancer. And all of us are aware that the reading public seems woefully unaware of how to test the conclusions of such writers. I think that the most important skills that students learn from a research course are those that they will use later in reading, not writing.

Most 101 courses encourage student writing that is very subjective. It makes an excellent place to start, but to leave students with the impression that all writing is a record of the author's momentary impressions is a terrible injustice. I'm sure all of us have had one of those horrible moments when we realized that this misconception had been allowed to form, when a student, confronted with an assigned essay displaying careful evidence and argument, dismisses it with, "Oh, that's just <u>that</u> author's opinion!" If students go through college spinning out their own opinions for their English instructors and regurgitating lectures (usually regarded as the professor's opinions) in their other classes, their ability to function as mature readers after graduation will be handicapped, and their lack of appreciation, in college and out, of the heinousness of plagiarism will be understandable.

I have, over the past few years, developed, with the help of my Freshman English Committee, an approach to the research semester that seems to me far

more beneficial to the students than the more traditional pattern. What's more, the students seem to enjoy it more, and appear more relaxed and capable, and for these reasons and others, I haven't had a case of intentional plagiarism in three years, which makes my job a lot easier.

One problem with the traditional research paper unit, at least as it was too often taught at our school, was that it was a one-shot deal. At the end of the second semester students wrote one long source paper to demonstrate their mastery of all research skills; flunking that paper meant flunking the course. This hardly created an atmosphere of respect for careful research and original thinking; it did send the students in droves to the fraternity files. I have changed this procedure so that now my students spend the entire semester taking up and mastering, one at a time, the various skills needed to write such a paper. Doing research requires more than an introduction to the Dewey Decimal System and the tools of the Research Room: students must be able to make meaningful use of the sources they track down. This requires such skills as reading for thesis and development, separating facts from opinions, and testing both. Taking good notes requires the ability to paraphrase, to summarize, and to quote, and to decide when to do each. Writing the research paper presents problems not only of organization and documentation, but also of synthesizing material from various authors and of using sources to support an independent thesis. I use my students' reading assignments as models of the effective use of these skills, and plan their assignments to demonstrate a progressive mastery of these skills during the semester. The final paper closely resembles the old term paper, except that it's shorter, carries an equal importance to the other papers in the grade average, and, after a whole semester of preparation, is a lot better written than any paper I received in the old days.

Since emphasizing the reading skills of research as much as the writing skills is just that--an emphasis--a variety of materials and assignments could be used during the semester. I will explain the specific assignments I have used in order to describe my approach more clearly, but many variations are possible.

I begin with some good essays based on research. I have had good success with the collection Rhetorical Considerations, edited by Brent and Lutz (Winthrop, 1974), but there are many other collections that could do as well. Students in 102 have experienced class discussions in 101 that analyzed essay development through examples, comparisons, and other methods; they can easily be introduced to the analysis of an essay based on research.

For these early discussions, I look for essays that substantiate their arguments with a mixture of factual information, statistics, and the opinions of others. Frequently such essays have internal attribution, not footnotes, a format I welcome at this time because it allows the instructor to stress the importance of attribution itself, not its form. Beginning with such essays also has the good effect of putting the stress on the author's desire to develop his or her own thesis, not to accumulate a scrapbook of the opinions of others. During this early part of the semester I require daily assignments that deal with basic reading and note-taking skills: identifying theses, analyzing development, paraphrasing, and synthesizing. The first theme is fairly subjective: the students compare their own opinions with those of one of the essayists, gaining experience in that difficult skill of combining the opinions of two individuals in one paragraph without confusing the reader. I have students attach bibliography pages to their themes from the first assignment but don't introduce footnotes until later. By staggering the introduction of

these two documentation devices I prevent some of the confusion often found in students' minds about the difference between them. Besides, making the students use only internal attribution at first makes them less afraid to use it later.

Our department has placed the teaching of logical thinking in the second semester course, so I work in some of the material on logic in our textbook at this point as I move into analyzing essays in terms of the logic of their arguments and the accuracy of their references. My first library assignments send students to corroborate the evidence cited in the essays they have read. A fruitless two-hour attempt to locate an opinion quoted in an essay but attached only to its speaker's name does more to explain the value of full documentation than threats of flunking the course ever could. The second paper analyzes the reliability of the conclusions reached in one essay, based on the class discussions and library work. This assignment, which sounds terribly difficult, is made easier by the fact that it is almost a class effort, researched, reasoned, and outlined jointly and then written up independently.

Some instructors worry about the amount of control to place over such analytical efforts on the part of students. I maintain a middle-of-the-road position on this question. I think it is important that students learn that sloppy research and imprecise logic exist and that they should be identified and discredited. But I also think that students should become aware of and comfortable with the notion that in many areas of human concern well-supported arguments are possible on both sides of an issue. If some students do not want to go along with the majority opinion of the article in question, I welcome a "minority report." I always take a selection of the papers to the class, using multiple copies or the overhead projector, and such a diversity makes this later study more interesting. Also, at this point I remind students that

most of the articles in our essay collection were originally published in periodicals. I send them to the library to find out if the article in question elicited any response in the months following its publication. With luck or foresight, such letters will exist and will be similar to the themes the students have just written. Students are always delighted to discover that others of their own free will sometimes engage in writing similar to that required of the students, and they painlessly acquire an interest in another source of information. Book reviews and the Book Review Digest can be introduced in this manner also. Next year for the first time I will be teaching an honors section in which each student will have a subscription to Harper's; I am going to try this assignment with a current article and have the students vote on one theme to submit as a letter to the editor.

In preparation for the next part of the semester, several weeks earlier I have each class vote on some current topic of interest and start clipping newspaper and magazine articles and editorials about it. Most students are rather fuzzy at the beginning about these categories, and one of the most useful outcomes of this assignment is that students learn to identify the differences between factual and editorial writing and to realize that neither should be accepted at face value but that the tests for each are different. After the students have finished the second theme assignment, I turn to this file of clippings and use both daily assignments and class discussion to examine the evidence and reasoning in the editorials in the light of the news stories. I base one or two theme assignments on this material. Somewhere around this point I give students the option of continuing to use internal attribution exclusively or switching to footnotes. Surprisingly, they opt for footnotes, and that hurdle gets crossed rather quickly.

At this point of the semester I switch to the library as a source for papers, but not to books. As a follow-up on the study of a current issue in newspapers and magazines, we study the newspapers and magazines available in our library from some particular year chosen by me--this year it was 1924. We are lucky in having an extensive microfilm collection and a librarian who loves to show students how to operate the machines. For this assignment every student gets to pick a separate topic to research within that year, and of course this is the point at which I discuss various indexes and the Reader's Guide. It is also the point at which note cards and the nuances of paraphrasing and quotation become important--it's not difficult for a student to see that a page of newspaper on microfilm can neither be xeroxed or carried to the typewriter. Because these projects are so individual, it is difficult to give close supervision in class meetings, so at this part of the semester I switch to individual progress checks and conferences to discuss outlines and rough drafts. These papers turn out very well. When they have been completed, we spend several days going over several of them, pointing out good uses of synthesis and development as well as problem areas.

By the time the students finish their 1924 paper, they have had some practice in all the skill areas of research, from using the microfilm reader to running in a two-word quotation. The students' early papers are tightly argued, but limited in their sources; the 1924 paper is based on excellent primary sources but is more descriptive than argumentative in its thesis. In the final month of the semester ~~the~~ each student works on an independent project of his or her own choosing that will demonstrate a final mastery of these skills. Most of my instruction at this point of the semester is again individual; the confidence and motivation come from the students themselves. Unlike some of their friends

who have been caught cold with a research paper assignment, my students know what they are doing, and it shows in their attitudes and their work. My success is not complete, of course; what teacher's is? But I find more borderline students catching on and producing passing work under this system than under the previous less demanding one. And I get a little glow when I realize that my effort is not validated only by later research papers they write, but by the way they have learned to read newspapers and magazines and books. So when abolishing the research unit comes up again next year, as I know it will, I'm going to be in there fighting.

There is one argument against the research unit that I didn't mention earlier, but it is on my mind because my chairman always voices it. Students need the second semester to work on their writing, he says; they don't have time to waste on research. Right now, I don't have the evidence to answer this objection, but if that other perennial motion of our department, the departmental exam, is ever passed, then I think I'll have a golden opportunity to show that teaching students how to read doesn't mean neglecting to teach them how to write.